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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes information on the roles of the Federal Government, the family, and teachers in preparing young children with disabilities for school. Noted are relevant provisions of Public Law 99-457, the 1986 Amendments to the Education of the Handicapped Act (Part B), including development of Individualized Family Service Plans to aid in the transition from preschool to the general school setting. Parents are seen as teachers, partners, decision makers, and/or advocates. The important roles of both sending- and receiving-teachers in the transition process, the Capstone Transition Process, is briefly described, and the Capstone Transition Timeline of 15 steps is listed. Includes nine references. (DB)

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Preparing Children with Disabilities for School

Dianna Pinkerton

"All disadvantaged and disabled children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school" (from Goal 1, *National Goals for Education*, 1990).

How Does the Federal Government Support Readiness for Children with Disabilities?

Public Law 99-457, the 1986 Amendments to the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA), addresses the needs of young children with disabilities through two programs: the Handicapped Infants and Toddlers Program for children birth through age 2 and the Preschool Grants Program for 3 to 5 year olds. Together these programs represent an important effort to expand the scope of services available to the nation's youngest children with disabilities and their families. The Handicapped Infants and Toddlers Program, Part H of the EHA, supports the planning, development, and implementation of an interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers who have disabilities. The Preschool Grants Program, Section 619 of Part B of the EHA, is designed to ensure the availability of a free, appropriate public education for all children ages 3 to 5 with disabilities. Both programs provide federal support for meeting Goal 1 of the National Goals: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." During the 1989-1990 school year approximately 642,000 children were served through these programs (*Thirteenth Annual Report to Congress*, 1991, p. 84).

What Special Problems Are Faced by Children with Disabilities as They Make the Transition from Preschool to the General School Setting?

The transition from preschool to school can be difficult for a child with disabilities. The preschool environment characterized by small groups and individual attention is replaced by classrooms with more children, fewer adults per child, and greater demand for adapting to general classroom procedures and working independently (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & Miller, 1990). Parents and teachers from both receiving and sending programs need to be involved in placement as well as scheduling and facilitating the move (Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1991). P.L. 99-457 recognizes the importance of preparing children and their families by requiring that specific steps be addressed in each child's individualized family service plan (IFSP) for children from birth through age 2 or individualized education program (IEP) for preschoolers.

What Role Do Families Play?

Family members play a key role in providing information about the child's abilities, strengths and weaknesses, and interests. Parental insights complement information obtained from preschool sources and provide a broader picture of the child's capabilities and needs. Identifying specific ways for parents to be involved in the process is essential to a good transition (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990).

Parents may act as teachers, partners, decisionmakers, and/or advocates (Shearer & Shearer, 1977). They are teachers when they reinforce the skills acquired in preschool, partners when they communicate needs with school personnel, and decisionmakers when they participate in the IEP process. Parents can help prepare the child for the transition to public school by maintaining and generalizing skills necessary for the transition. They also serve as a bridge between the two programs, visiting the new program with their child, helping the child to become familiar with the new setting, and discussing concerns and fears connected with the upcoming change. They can also help bridge the gap by arranging visits with former preschool friends and teachers as well as with new classmates. Parents can help their child develop skills in following directions, playing independently, attending to task, and self-care. These skills will help prepare the child for the new setting (Hains, Fowler, & Chandler, 1988).

What Role Do Teachers Play?

Sending and receiving teachers both play important roles in the transition process. Teacher attitudes, instructional priorities, and communication with parents and other members of the transition team will determine the quality of the child's transition (Hains et al., 1988). Sending and receiving teachers may have different goals and priorities, but they play complementary roles in preparing the child for the move from preschool to the general school setting.

The sending teacher should find out what skills the child will need in order to function adequately in the new setting and implement a program for preparing the child to develop those skills. Familiarity with the receiving program is essential in order to design an appropriate transition curriculum. The sending teacher can gain a better understanding of prerequisite skills by visiting the receiving classroom. For children placed in an integrated setting, behavioral requirements for successful functioning have been assessed and are referred to as *survival skills*. These include being able to function independently during group instruction, following classroom routines, completing tasks within an allotted time period, and working in the absence of teacher direction. Teaching survival skills as part of the preschool curriculum helps prepare the

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child for the demands of the general school setting (Carta, Atwater, & Schwartz, 1991). Skill-building activities should be developmentally appropriate for each child.

The success of the transition preparation is ultimately determined by the child's adaptation to the new environment. The receiving teacher's attitude toward and experience with children with disabilities may be factors in the success of the child's placement. Some flexibility will probably be required on the teacher's part in order to adjust expectations and adapt to the child's special needs. The sending and receiving teachers will have the continuing role of acting as liaisons between programs and with parents. Good communication and clearly defined goals will facilitate the preparation for the child's move from preschool to the general school setting.

What Are the Elements of a Successful Transition Process?

The Capstone Transition Process (Johnson, Cook, & Yongue, 1990) is one model that provides clear guidelines for the transition process. The first activity initiates long-range planning by establishing a "transition timeline." This timeline serves as a guide for accomplishing transition activities and can be set up in chart form to track activities. The Capstone Transition Process addresses specific activities beginning 12 months before the move to a new program. The process includes preparation, implementation, and evaluation activities. The initial steps of the process are designed to prepare the participants for their role in the transition. Steps include notifying and preparing parents and teachers from both the sending and receiving programs. Data on the child's needs are collected or updated. A profile of communication procedures, available services, prerequisite skills, and teacher expectations is developed from existing information. The preparation phase of the process culminates with the development by the transition team of an IEP for use as the basis of educational programming in the new setting. Following the IEP meeting, the timeline provides reminders for the transfer of information and records to the receiving program. The final step calls for evaluation of the effectiveness of the process.

Capstone Transition Timeline

- Develop the transition timeline.
- Notify appropriate administrators of the student's approaching transition.
- Inform parent(s)/primary caregiver(s) that the child will be making the transition and collect information on family transition needs.
- Determine the communication policy of the potential receiving program(s) and obtain a description of the program(s).
- Obtain information from teacher(s) in potential receiving program(s) regarding the program/classroom overview and skills perceived as important for transition into the classroom.

- Verify the receipt of transition information and/or followup request for the transition information or additional information.
- Reevaluate: verify the student's assessment and eligibility.
- Prepare the parents for the transition planning meeting.
- Hold the transition planning meeting.
- Hold the IEP meeting. Obtain permission from the parents to release information.
- Provide information to all transition team participants.
- Link the parent/primary caregiver of the transitioning child with a parent/primary caregiver of a child already attending the new program.
- Send the receiving program all pertinent records and verify the receipt of the records.
- Provide the receiving program with information about the child's current program.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the process after completion.

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